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Common Characteristics of School Administrators Who are Perceived as Effective in Meeting the  
Needs of Students with Disabilities

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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by

Carissa Gail Mitchell

December 2011

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Keywords: Leadership, Special Education, Students with Disabilities, Principals, Administration

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Common Characteristics of School Administrators Who are Perceived as Effective in Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities**

by

Carissa Gail Mitchell

This qualitative study was conducted in 3 school systems in East Tennessee by interviewing special education directors, school principals, and teachers. The purpose of this study was to identify administrators who are successful in meeting the needs of special education students and determine characteristics they possess that facilitate success. The grounded theory study employed purposeful sampling and the snowball sampling method. It also included the use of a pilot study to refine the interview protocol. This study includes the characteristics of effective principals as perceived by the special education directors, principals, and teachers. Although some variety of conclusions existed within and among the three groups, this study fulfilled that purpose by identifying several characteristics of principals who are effective in meeting needs of special education students. These characteristics include: having direct contact with special education students, taking responsibility for special education students, serving as an instructional leader, building relationships with parents, and having a high degree of competency in addressing the needs of special education students, providing services, and helping develop programs that meet the needs of children with disabilities. This study is significant because it provides direction and specific information to administrators and teachers on the characteristics of effective administrations regarding students with disabilities that they can use to improve their leadership skills and guide their employment decisions.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the individuals who have assisted me in obtaining my graduate degree. Thank you to my husband Dan. Dan, you have been endlessly supportive and helpful. You never complained about the long hours I spent working on “my paper”, and you were always willing to pick up more than your fair share of the things that needed to be done. Thank you to my mother Sandy Enloe for constantly nagging, I mean encouraging, me to finish my work. I know that every moment you push me is for my benefit and that you do it all out of love. Thank you to my step-father John Enloe for sharing your knowledge of research and editing and for helping me keep perspective. I am limitlessly grateful to you all for your love, support, and understanding.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The recent upward growth in inclusive programming for special education students has resulted in an increase of the number of special education students who are educated in the general curriculum (Jimenez, Graf, & Rose, 2007). As a result principals are now expected to take a more direct approach to meeting the needs of students with disabilities by leading, managing, and implementing effective programming (Jacobs, Tonnsen, & Baker, 2004; Sage & Burello, 1994). Traditionally building level administrators have shown less commitment to special education programs and students than they have to those in regular education (Jacobs et al., 2004; VanHorn, Burrello, & DeClue, 1992). However, the increasingly influential role of principals in the classrooms of special education teachers means that principals must show equal commitment to the needs of regular education students and students with disabilities (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Also, principals' increased participation in special education classrooms means that principals need to be better trained in addressing special education issues.

The increase of special education students educated in general education settings means that a greater number of students are perceived as general education students first and special education students second (Jimenez et al., 2007). This change in perspective increases the need for administrators to know and use effective programming and leadership strategies for all students, including students with disabilities.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify administrators who are successful in meeting the needs of special education students and determine characteristics they possess that facilitate success.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the common characteristics of principals who are perceived as being effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
2. What are the education and professional backgrounds of those perceived as effective in meeting the needs of special education students?

## **Definitions**

For purposes of this study, the following terms and definitions will be used:

*Administrator* – Used interchangeably with principal and instructional leader, the administrator is the person within the school who serves in both a leadership a managerial capacity by means of appointed position.

*Effective* - The effectiveness of an administrator is measured by the commonality of responses to the interview question, “What characteristics do you think make a principal effective in administering to special education students?”. Characteristics given in response by 50% or more respondents are considered effective.

*Instructional Leader* – Used interchangeably with principal and administrator, the instructional leader is the person within the school who serves in both a leadership and managerial capacity by means of appointed position.

*Principal* – Used interchangeably with administrator and instructional leader, the principal is the person within the school who serves in both a leadership and managerial capacity by means of appointed position.

*Principal Preparation Program* – Any program offered by an accredited college or university that results in an endorsement in administration or school leadership and fulfills the qualifications of a position as a school administrator is identified as a principal preparation program.

*Special Education* – The services and supports provided as a method of providing a free and appropriate education to qualifying students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment qualify as special education.

*Special education students* - Students who are identified as qualifying for special education services and who have a current IEP.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The study included the special education directors, school principals, and teachers in the East Tennessee area. Superintendents and vice principals were purposefully excluded to increase consistency of people being interviewed. Only the East Tennessee area was included because of the interview nature of the study that requires significant travel and time. The school systems used in this study all have multiple schools and greater than 100 special education students total. The results of the study may not apply to school systems outside the East Tennessee area, schools systems that consist of only one school, or systems that have fewer than 100 special education students. The interview method of the study also results in a low number of participants (approximately 30). The study parameters were defined by the interview protocol and included specifically: principal effectiveness, administrative and leadership methods, job duties regarding special education, educational background, and principal preparation programs.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to determine the common characteristics of principals who are perceived as effective in serving as the instructional leader for students with disabilities and their teachers. The study could provide school administrators with possible strategies for addressing the instructional needs of special education students.

The Review of Literature, Chapter 2, provides the reader with a background of the current condition of special education including legislation and legal requirements. The role of the school administrator as an instructional leader was discussed as well as the modern principal's preparedness to serve as the instructional leader for students with disabilities. Principal attitudes regarding special education, their knowledge levels, and subsequent job duties were reviewed. The review of literature covered the appropriateness of the programs that are expected to prepare principals for leadership.

Chapter 3 of the study defines the methodology that was used. The methodology of the study was qualitative and employed interviews to determine which principals are effective in leading special education students. System special education directors were interviewed first to determine what characteristics of principals they believe are effective in working with special education students. Those participants were asked to provide the contact information for the principals in their systems who they believe have those characteristics of effectiveness previously identified. Those principals were then interviewed to determine what characteristics they believe make them effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. They were also asked about their educational and professional backgrounds and their principal preparation programs. Those principals were then asked to identify two to three teachers in their buildings who would be able to discuss each principal's ability to address the needs of special education students. Finally, those teachers were interviewed.

Chapter 4 of the study is the presentation and analysis of the data collected from the interviews of the special education directors, principals, and teachers. The data were analyzed to determine what characteristics of effectiveness were commonly identified among special education directors, school principals, and teachers. Those characteristics with a high rate of commonality (greater than 50%) were considered effective. The responses of the principals in regard to their educational and professional backgrounds and principal preparations programs were analyzed to determine common responses as well. Each of these responses was considered to have a high rate of commonality if it was

identified by 50% or more by interviewees. The purpose of this line of questioning was to determine if those principals deemed effective had similar backgrounds or preparation programs. Finally Chapter 5 presents the results of the synthesis of the interview responses, conclusions, the implications of the results, and suggestions for future study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Two pieces of federal legislation have changed the landscape of education for students certified as disabled. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), both brought on changes to the delivery of special education services that increased the impact of the principal's leadership (Jones, Barrack, & Kirkel, 2008). IDEIA included a requirement that special education students be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (IDEIA, 2004). The purpose of this requirement was to increase special education students' access to the general education curriculum (Jimenez & Graf, 2008). The byproduct of this requirement is that students who would have previously been served in a special education setting are now being served in regular education settings. Therefore, the school principal has more direct contact with those students and is integral in creating an environment of acceptance for them (Jimenez & Graf, 2008).

No Child Left Behind is a piece of federal legislation that includes a provision that all students, including those with disabilities, must take an achievement test every year (Jones et al, 2008; NCLB, 2001). In addition schools must meet requirements for attendance and graduation. Principals who are actively involved in the education and inclusion of students with disabilities can increase those students' attendance, positive behavior, and achievement and meet the

requirements of NCLB and IDEIA (Jimenez & Graf, 2008).

Special education students are an increasing population of students within schools (Jimenez et al, 2007). These students require unique and individualized instruction and leadership. As the needs of special education students change, school leadership must adapt to meet those students' needs (Protz, 2005; Rascoe, 2007). The role of school principals is multifaceted regarding serving special education students. Principals must be knowledgeable of their students' needs (Jimenez & Graf, 2008) and of the laws that govern their educational services (Rascoe, 2007). They must also be aware of and capable of implementing the leadership methods that have proven effective in improving the educational experience of students with disabilities (Jimenez & Graf, 2008). A principal should be prepared to serve his or her school as instructional leader for both teachers and students (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Hallinger, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1998).

### **Instructional Leadership**

Leadership has a variety of definitions that explain it as a process, concept, trait, skill, and phenomenon. There are a variety of leadership types, but for the purposes of this study leadership is defined generally as a process by which leaders influence and engage followers to attain a goal (Northouse, 2007). Northouse (2007) explains that “leadership involves influence. Without influence leadership does not exist.” (p.3). Instructional leadership is a more specific form of leadership that is defined by a principal who is actively involved in making curriculum decisions and is spending time in the classroom as leader in creating educational programs (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). The purpose of instructional leadership is to improve the levels of instruction and achievement and create an environment within the school of cooperation, shared ownership,

teacher development and empowerment, support, and educational equality (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Reitzug, 1994).

Most school principals are expected to provide instructional leadership for both teachers and students (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Hallinger, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1998). An analysis of studies revealed that most concepts of instructional leadership regarding teachers concentrate on a few common components: providing access to professional development opportunities, supporting teachers' instruction, creating an environment of collaboration and shared leadership, and holding high expectations for achievement for all students (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Glickman et al., 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000 ; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007). Idol (2006) found that teachers in the schools he studied consistently viewed the principal in the school as both an instructional and administrative leader. Those teachers also agreed that their principals were supportive of them as professionals (Idol, 2006). In order to be supportive of the schools' special education professionals, the principals must understand effective practices regarding students with disabilities and be aware of the instructional demands placed on classroom teachers (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Gonzalez, 1996; Lillie & Lesane, 2004; Wald, 1998). Instructional leaders must also have knowledge of effective instruction, assessment, and discipline in order to provide high quality support and feedback to teachers of students with disabilities, and they must be able to establish and support an environment in which regular education and special education teachers work collaboratively (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998).

Studies of effective schools have identified five instructional leadership priorities of effective principals: (a) defining and communicating the schools educational mission, (b) managing curriculum and instruction, (c) supporting and supervising teaching, (d) monitoring student progress, and (e) promoting a learning climate (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Blasé, 1987;



Blasé, Blasé, Anderson, & Dungan, 1995; Blasé & Kirby, 1992). These priorities keep effective administrators focused on student learning and professional development (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). A series of studies have focused on the affects of effective instructional leadership on teachers although not specifically teachers of students with disabilities. Reitzug (1994) found in a case study of elementary school principals that principals could improve their teachers' instruction by providing appropriate staff development, encouraging risk taking aimed at improving student achievement, and empowering teachers. Reitzug (1994) also found that talking with teachers inside and outside of the classroom was the linchpin of successful instructional leadership. Another study added that a positive correlation exists between the principals' instructional leadership skills and the achievement of the students (Meek, 2000). Finally a comprehensive study of teachers and principals from 24 schools determined that an instructional leadership model in which the teachers and administrators worked collaboratively was more effective than other leadership models (Marks & Printy, 2003). In addition the collaborative model had a positive influence on the overall performance of the schools, quality of teacher instruction, and students' achievement. One principal reported that she was able to gradually change the mind-set of her teachers and create a collaborative environment in which student outcomes increased by "continually reminding teachers that special education students belong to every teacher." (Heckert, 2009, p.91)

### **How the Administration's Leadership Affects Schools**

Principals who administer effective schools and programs have similar characteristics (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). These principals are aware of their own professional strengths, have an understanding of their time management skills and restraints, recognize

achievements, skills, and professional needs of their staffs, and “know how to foster shared leadership to support new instructional initiatives” (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003) (p.12). Administrators must also stay abreast of all current laws and regulations that affect their schools' programming (Katherman, 1998). One of the most pressing challenges facing principals in their struggle to provide effective education leadership for all students is educational leadership in special education and for students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

### **How the Administration's Leadership Affects Special Education**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) was intended to improve students' achievement by increasing standards for proficiency and requiring that all students including those with disabilities take and pass standardized achievement tests (Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006). In order for students with disabilities to achieve proficiency on standardized assessments, their access to the general curriculum was increased by each revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004, which included a provision that all students be involved in the general curriculum as much as possible (Jones et al., 2008). In addition, the instruction provided to students with disabilities should be individualized and specific to their disability area while still covering the required regular curriculum contents (Jimenez & Graf, 2008). It is the general and special education teachers who are responsible for providing quality instruction for students with disabilities so that they can achieve success in the general curriculum (Crockett, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2004). The responsibility for special education students' educational needs is increasingly that of the regular education teacher (Cook, 2001). The increase in responsibility is because all special education students who are included in a regular classroom have a regular education teacher as their teacher of record (NCLB, 2001).

When the year's achievement test scores are tabulated as a measure of Annual Yearly Progress, NCLB's measure of the amount of increase in scores achieved per year, the scores of the special education students are attributed to their teachers of record (NCLB, 2001). Therefore, it is essential that the regular education teacher assume responsibility for the instruction of students with disabilities because as it relates to NCLB they are already responsible for the students' achievement scores.

Principals are considered critical to ensuring high quality instruction in inclusion education settings (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). However, without fundamental knowledge of special education law, IDEIA, and NCLB, principals cannot effectively administer special education teachers and students (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; NAESP, 2001a; Valente, 1998). Inadequate administrative support has been cited as a primary reason that regular education teachers fail to provide students with disabilities with high quality instruction (Scott, Vitale, & Masten, 1998; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Furthermore, special education teachers indicate that they are hindered by unsupportive working conditions, administrators with unrealistic expectations, and inadequate leadership (Crockett, 2004).

Studies relating to the direct effects of principal leadership have been primarily inconclusive (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). However, studies regarding the indirect effect of principal leadership have been conclusive and consistent. The indirect results indicate that principals' leadership of teachers can significantly affect students' achievement (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003; Meek, 2000; Sheppard, 1996; Witziers et al., 2003). School principals can increase students' academic achievement by increasing the quality of instruction they receive. Factors such as providing teachers with educational leadership in the form of professional development

and support, increasing teacher empowerment, having high expectations for achievement, and being an instructional presence in the classroom can also increase student achievement. The administration is then responsible for facilitating success in the classroom by providing the teachers with planning time, professional development, support, and instructional leadership so that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to provide high quality instruction (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Crockett, 2004; DiPaolola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Despite this body of research on the effects of the principal on students' achievement, there is little research that addresses the effects of principals on the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

Principals play a critical role in creating school environments where students with disabilities receive effective instruction and appropriate services in inclusive settings (Salisbury, 2006). Principals who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate support for special education and provide professional development for teachers can improve outcomes for students with disabilities and for others at risk for school failure (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Gersten et al., 2001; Klingner, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001). Also, principals can have a positive impact on the implementation of interventions and programming designed to increase academic achievement for students with disabilities (Embich, 2001; Noell & Witt, 1999). In order to create successful school environments for students with disabilities principals also have to be willing to provide their teachers with the tools and resources necessary (Salisbury, 2006). A series of studies have indicated that schools that were successful in implementing inclusion programs had principals who employed collaborative decision making and shared a common vision of inclusion with their teachers (Salisbury, 2006).

Recent shortages of qualified principals have impacted the quality of services provided to students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). It is difficult for new principals who have little or no experience to provide students with exceptional needs with appropriate services. Even principals who have experience in administration, sometimes lack the specific skills required to provide quality services for those students (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Therefore, administrators often request assistance from the special education teachers in their schools regarding instruction, services, and programming (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Cook, Semmel & Gerber, 1999; Lasky & Karge, 2006). Still, principals need higher levels of understanding regarding special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). If principals do not have a clear understanding of teachers' professional development needs and professional support needs such as manageable caseload numbers and training on specific disabilities, they may unintentionally discourage teachers from providing quality educational services for students with special needs (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Pankake & Fullwood, 1999; Sage & Burrello, 1994; Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000). One of the subjects in Heckert's (2009) study expressed the situation thusly:

I have to initiate everything....I think it is because she isn't sure about what I do in my classroom because she doesn't really come into my room. If she does, she might leave a note, but there aren't any suggestions for my instruction. I haven't really learned anything from her about instruction for my students with learning disabilities. The only time we really talk about my kids is in an ARD [an intervention meeting for struggling students], and sometimes that's too late. (p.86)

Evidence has shown that a lack of understanding on the part of principals causes frustration to develop on the part of the teachers who work with disabled students that can result in a failure to provide high quality services (Heckert, 2009).

A shortage of qualified special education teachers is also an issue that is currently faced by school administrators (USDOE, 2001). NCLB has enacted strict performance expectations for

students with disabilities and higher quality standards for the teachers of those students (Jones et al., 2008; NCLB, 2001). Ninety-nine percent of special education students are required to participate in state achievement testing with only 1% allowed to take alternative assessments (NCLB, 2001). Many new educators are not adequately prepared to provide effective academic instruction for high needs students as well as the social, emotional, and sometimes physical, supports those students require to achieve success (Lillie & Lesane, 2004). Estimations are that as many as half of new special education teachers leave the profession within the first 3 years, “as a result of poor administrative support, poor preparation, complex job responsibilities, and overwhelming paperwork requirements” (Boe, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999; Embich, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999 as quoted in Lillie & Lesane, 2004, p. 3). Many principals hire temporary special education teachers to serve as emergency personnel. These teachers are not equipped with the necessary knowledge to provide quality instruction for students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

However, the special education teachers who remained in the profession are four times more likely to report that their administrators are supportive and encouraging (Boe et al., 1999). Therefore, the research shows that the principal has a significant impact on special education teacher attrition. Principals can decrease attrition by providing supportive educational environments where teachers feel empowered and are provided meaningful professional development, have greater job satisfaction, and less stress (Billingsly & Cross, 1991; Gersten et al., 2001). Studies of special educator job satisfaction still do not address how principals can improve instructional leadership practices for teachers of students with disabilities (Heckert, 2009). Heckert’s (2009) study of the knowledge levels of principals indirectly addressed the abilities of principals who had backgrounds in special education. That study found that

principals who had previously served as active special educators had high levels of knowledge regarding effective instructional practices for students with disabilities. Those principals were able to produce better educational outcomes from the students identified as special education (Heckert, 2009). Also, the teachers serving under those principals reported that there was an environment of collaboration and mutual respect between themselves and the administration. These results suggest that principals with backgrounds in special education were able to create better working environments for their special education teachers and higher academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Heckert, 2009).

### **Principals' Attitudes Toward Special Education**

The background of the principal can also have an impact on his or her attitude toward serving special education students (Katherman, 1998; Olsen, 1992; Protz, 2005). Research indicates that principals who have not been trained in special education harbor negative attitudes about assuming additional responsibilities for special education and students with disabilities (Olsen, 1992). In addition the combination of high legal risk and general unpreparedness causes many school administrators to have negative perceptions of special education (Webb, Bessette, Smith, & Tubbs, 2009). Katherman's (1998) research review found a trend of “marginal” or “poor” (p.50) knowledge of special education law amongst school administrators. Protz's study in 2005 supports Katherman's findings and indicates that a lack of knowledge in special education adversely effects principals' perceptions of students with disabilities as they relate to the school environment.

### **Principals' Job Duties Regarding Special Education**

In many cases the school administrator who has special education experience or training assumes more responsibility for special education in order to better serve students with disabilities (Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson, & Hilton, 2006). Principals with a background in special education referred fewer students to services outside their home schools. This discrepancy indicates that those principals who have a background in special education are more capable of addressing special education issues while the students are enrolled in their home schools (Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson, & Hilton, 2006). Studies show that placing students in alternative educational settings, or educational settings outside of their assigned home schools has mixed results (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Although some results indicate that students in alternative placements have a lower dropout rate, the majority of research in the area indicates a negative effective on the academic achievement of those students. Even a small amount of training in special education has proven to be effective in preparing principals for leadership roles in special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009).

In some cases newly appointed administrators are assigned special education as one of their primary duties (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Previous research indicates that many principals, not limited to novices, lack the course work and field experience necessary to create school environments in which special education students, parents, and teachers can succeed (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Katsiyannis, Conderman, & Franks, 1996; Parker & Day, 1997). Without sufficient education regarding inclusion and students with disabilities, principals are at a disadvantage entering the field of administration (Salisbury, 2006). Principals need to accumulate specific knowledge about students with disabilities, their certifying disabilities, service options, and instructional interventions, and they need to set high standards for



themselves in regards to their knowledge levels (Salisbury, 2006). Although principals do not need to be disability experts, they do need a base of knowledge and skills that will enable them to create successful school experiences for students with disabilities and perform in the leadership function for special education teachers (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Many principals feel unprepared for the challenges of providing appropriate programs and services for students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Principals indicate that they need additional support and training to develop programs for these students. DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found that principals identified “help and information about implementing successful special education programs as their greatest need” (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003, p.13).

Bays and Crockett (2007) found that rural elementary principals dispersed the responsibility for special education among the educators in the schools. This dispersion of responsibility generally weakened the instructional leadership for students with disabilities because the administration was minimally involved in the program planning for the special education students and had little interaction with their teachers (Bays & Crockett, 2007). One of the case studies in Heckert’s (2009) study included that the special education staff was primarily responsible for programming decisions, instructional supports, and specially designed instruction. The special education staff was also responsible for addressing problems that regular education teachers were having with special education students (Heckert, 2009).

Rather than using the same instructional practices for all students, teachers must focus their teaching on the needs of students by using specially designed instruction adapted to the students’ learning styles (Heckert, 2009). This is especially true for teaching students with disabilities. However, research indicates that regular education teachers are ill prepared to

provide high quality instruction for special education students and at-risk students (Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Schumm, Vaughn, Gordon, & Rothlein, 1994; Scruggs & Mastropeiri, 1996; Speece & Keogh, 1996). Regular education teachers who feel that they are unable to provide high quality instruction for all students attribute this failure to administrators who were unable to provide adequate and supportive working conditions (Crockett, 2004). Salisbury (2006) found, in a mixed methods study of elementary school principals that the time associated with special education was a major factor in the administration of the school day. In fact, the principals indicated that the time spent with special education is a detriment to their ability to complete other administrative job duties (Salisbury, 2006). The time spent in IEP meetings was identified specifically.

However, academic outcomes for students with disabilities and students at-risk improve when principals demonstrate a working knowledge of special education, provide supportive working conditions, and provide professional development (Klingner et al., 2001). Heckert (2009) determined that principals who had backgrounds in special education were likely to perceive specialized instruction for all students as feasible. Those principals also had higher levels of knowledge regarding instructional practices for students with disabilities and at-risk students, and they had more open communication and more frequent contact with special education teachers in their classrooms. The principals who had special education degrees were perceived as instructional leaders for special education teachers (Heckert, 2009).

### **Principals' Knowledge Levels Regarding Special Education**

There are a multitude of special education areas in which principals report difficulty. Principals indicate that implementing programs for students with disabilities to be particularly

troublesome (Evans, 2002). Programming for students with disabilities requires a considerable cache of special education knowledge. Principals must be familiar with instructional standards, discipline, and programming regulations. Furthermore, principals must understand not only laws and regulations for students who are already certified special education but also the regulations for evaluating and certifying new students for special education services (Evans, 2002). In a study by Rhys (1996) principals indicated that they were unaware that in order for a student to receive special education services, the student must not only meet the criteria for identification but also be in need of the service. Principal knowledge is a key factor in creating a school environment where students with disabilities are included, accepted, and celebrated (Rhys, 1996). In addition increasing principals' knowledge of special education helps avoid legal entanglements, retain and recruit effective special education teachers, and increase effective programming for students with disabilities (Burrello, Schrup, & Barnett, 1992). "Failure to know the law can divert a professional's time and energy away from learning as they prepare for litigation" (Katherman, 1998, p.1).

A review of the research on principals' degrees of knowledge regarding special education reveals that principals do not consistently maintain high knowledge levels regarding special education (Katherman, 1998). Concurrently Cline (1981) and Olsen (1982) determined that principals need to make improvements on their knowledge of special education. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2001) principals cannot effectively serve as educational leaders without a working knowledge of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, No Child Left Behind, disability certifications, and other special education laws and regulations (Valente, 1998; Webb et al., 2009).

In general elementary administrators have a higher knowledge of special education law than secondary school administrators (Robertson, 1996). In the research on principals who do think they have a good knowledge base for special education, principals continued to exhibit gaps in their understanding (Bagnato, 1990; Hirth & Valesky, 1989; Ivey, 2008; Katherman, 1998; Protz, 2005; Robertson, 1996). In a study by Hirth and Valesky (1989) the researchers found that principals knew more about procedural safeguards than they did actual special education service delivery. In addition, a study of administrators' general special education knowledge found that administrators lacked sufficient knowledge of evaluation, re-evaluation, graduation, related services, compliance, and due process as these areas relate to special education (Protz, 2005). Also, secondary principals have reported a lack of understanding regarding the expulsion and suspension of students with disabilities (Bagnato, 1990). Between 1989 and 2005, the gap between where administrators' knowledge should be and where it actually was widened (Protz, 2005). This may be related to the fluidity of special education law and legal requirements (Rascoe, 2007). Protz's (2005) respondents indicated that on-going professional development regarding special education issues would be beneficial to their ability to supervise special education.

In a recent study Cooner, Tochtermann, and Garrison-Wade (2005) reported that principals “often feel unprepared for their roles in the administration of special programs” (p.1). They feel generally “overwhelmed by the number, diversity, and severity of children labeled 'special education’” (Cooner et al., p.1). Furthermore, principals indicated that they feel that their training in special education and special education leadership was inadequate and left them unprepared and ill trained for the challenges of inclusion and special education leadership (Patterson, Bowling, & Marshall, 2000). Although they may not be prepared, “principals are

responsible for ensuring the appropriate education of all students, including those with disabilities. They must provide the leadership to develop the knowledge base and have the competence to ensure compliance” (Katsiyannis, 1994, p.6). However, many principals do not have sufficient knowledge of disabilities, special education law, or the instructional needs of students with disabilities to function in the manner suggested by Angelle and Bilton (2009).

When principals are not actively involved with special education programs on a daily basis, they frequently rely on third party sources like the central office, special education staff, and memos for information regarding special education and students with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005; DeClue, 1990). Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that the majority (89%) of schools administrators studied listed collaboration with special education personnel as their primary source for information about special education, followed by professional development (51%), professional conferences (42%), and independent reading (41%). (Respondents were allowed to list more than one source.) Over 90% of principals surveyed by McLaughlin (2009) reported that the process of learning from their mistakes is one of the main ways they increase their knowledge about special education. Administrators of schools with students with disabilities exhibit a need for increased knowledge of effective leadership, conflict resolution, and effective staff evaluation procedures (Burello & Zadnik, 1986).

Noting the lack of working knowledge possessed by building level administrators, collaboration in the field of special education supervision is a necessity (Bays, 2001). Special education students require effective programming and case management at all grade levels and in all locations of service. Furthermore, the potential special education certifications and service needs possessed by students under any one principal's guidance is immense. Principals must take advantage of the knowledge of colleagues and specialists and available service in order to

provide an appropriate education for students with disabilities (Bays, 2001). Principals have to factor in the need to employ specific programs for specific students because programs that disregard specific student needs are ineffective and can result in noncompliance (McLaughlin, 2009). Principals must also remember that they are responsible for the school and every student in it. Therefore, if they choose to delegate their special education responsibilities, they must still have a working knowledge of special education in order to provide adequate supervision (Jacobs et al., 2004).

Another significant factor contributing to the necessity of principals remaining informed and aware of special education law and programming is the amount of time principals spend addressing special education issues. Elliot and Riddle (1992) found that the principals' responsibility for special education increased despite frequently referring specific problems to the special education administration. In a study of 96 principals 40 reported that their responsibility for special education consumed greater than 50% of their working time (Rascoe, 2007). In addition another 20 respondents had between 25%-50% of the responsibility for special education. Stevenson-Jacobs et al. (2006) reported similar findings from the population of principals who had special education degrees. Of those principals, three quarters reported having 75% of the responsibility for special education issues.

The percent of teaching positions filled by teachers who were not fully certified has risen from 9% in 1998 to 12.39% in 2005 (United States Department of Education, 1998; United States Department of Education, 2005). According to Fink and Brayman (2006) many local school districts are experiencing a lack of qualified employees because the baby boom generation is nearing retirement. Teaching positions are not the only position being vacated rapidly. Principalships are also being left vacant by retiring and burned out employees. All of

the new employees filling these positions will need guidance, training, and mentoring in order to improve their knowledge and skills (Bays, 2001). If principals are to provide effective leadership for the growing number of new, inexperienced teachers, they must expand their knowledge base to include all aspects of education including special education.

The number of new administrators is currently on the rise (Peterson, 2002). Therefore, principals must accumulate their own knowledge base as opposed to relying on special education personnel and the central office (Rascoe, 2007). Rascoe (2007) recommends that school districts seek out and employ people who are competent and have the knowledge and experience to assist the new principals and teachers regarding special education matters. Rascoe (2007) also suggests that state departments should support local education agencies by funding and implementing programs where school districts can train special education teachers to be administrators. As a result the local education agency would have a ready supply of administrators who were trained and experienced in special education. In addition those administrators who have a background in special education may have a better relationship with the special education teachers in their schools (Rascoe, 2007).

Acting school leaders are generally unprepared for the challenges of special education leadership (Crockett, 2002; Dipaolo & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Doyle, 2001). Most new principals are neither trained nor prepared for the legal and programming challenges of special education leadership and inclusion (Kallin & Valadez, 2002). The inexperience of these new administrators adds further legal liability and risk and is a barrier to effective special education services (Hirth & Valesky, 1991; Katsiyannis et al., 1996; Monteith, 1994). Principals who are not knowledgeable about special education may be unable to provide the special materials, services, and facilities required by students with disabilities (Bays, 2001). School administrators

must increase their knowledge of the special education process to ensure legal compliance and maintain their ethical responsibility to provide an education for all students (Webb et al., 2009). Those administrators who have a strong knowledge base in special education have the highest potential to “assume the daily challenges of promoting educational equity and increased achievement among diverse groups of learners, sustaining highly effective, competent, and motivated work force within the school, and managing an ethically, morally, legally, and pedagogically sound school culture” (p.3) that ensures a high quality education for all students (Webb et al., 2009).

In many cases the school administrator who has special education experience or training assumes more responsibility for special education in order to better serve students with disabilities (Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson, & Hilton, 2006). Even a small amount of training in special education has proven to be effective in preparing principals for leadership roles in special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). During their first year principals who had at least one course in special education reported a higher level of comfort when dealing with special education issues than those who had no special education courses. Furthermore, the time since the administrators completed their programs is not relevant to their comfort levels.

Administrators who completed their programs more than 15 years ago and those who finished their programs less than 5 years ago did not report significant changes in their comfort levels (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Although, any comfort level with special education is beneficial, this research shows that principal preparation programs have done little to increase the special education component in their programs. In failing to increase the special education component, those programs are doing a disservice to novice teachers by not preparing them for the challenges of special education leadership (Angelle & Bilton, 2009).



### **Principal Preparation Programs**

Although the responsibility of the principal has increased, almost no state requires any training in special education for an individual to become licensed as a principal (Bateman & Bateman, 2001). As the needs of special education teachers change and the role of principals evolves from manager to leader, leadership programs must also evolve to develop quality leaders with skills in regular education, special education, and school improvement (Risen, 2008). Bateman and Bateman (2001) developed a guide to aid administration program organizations in developing administrator training programs that produce administrators who are knowledgeable in special education. Their guide aims to improve administrator knowledge of special education law and procedures and improve administrator ability to provide support for special education staff and students (Bateman & Bateman, 2001). The ability of the instructional leader has proven to be essential in creating and maintaining a school environment where all students are accepted and receive a high quality education (Lowe & Bingham, 2002). Creating an inclusive and accepting school environment “begins by creating truly inclusive leadership preparation programs” (Angelle & Bilton, p.8).

A variety of studies including Angelle and Bilton (2009), Broyles (2004), Copenhaver (2005), Dickenson, Knopp, and Fauske (2003), Rascoe (2007), Webb et al., (2009) have examined the educational background of administrators as it related to special education. Many administrators are lacking in the necessary knowledge of special education as a result of inadequate training (Monteith, 1994). Asperdon's (1992) study found that 40% of principals surveyed indicated they had no training in special education. Additionally, of the principals surveyed 85% indicated that more training in special education was needed (Asperdon, 1992).

Asperdon's findings from 1992 were supported by Langley (1993), Dyal, Flynt, and Bennett-Walker (1996), and a further study by Langley (1999). In 1993, a study of South Carolina principals found that 75% of principals had no formal coursework or training in special education (Langley, 1993). Another study added that 44.5% of Alabama principals surveyed indicated that their training in special education was inadequate (Dyal et al., 1996).

Finally Langley expanded on his 1993 study by surveying Texas principals. Of those administrators 50% reported that they had no training and no formal coursework in special education (Langley, 1999). From this study inclusion was a specific area of concern. The principals surveyed by Dickinson et al. (2003) also reported a need for further training and education about inclusion. Those principals indicated that they viewed their college administrative programs as ineffective in preparing them for special education issues and the challenges of inclusion. Legal considerations of special education and managing daily inclusion issues and decisions are sparsely covered by administrative programs. Those principals also suggested a focused assessment of individual principal's knowledge and skills regarding inclusion in order to correctly place knowledgeable principals in the schools where they are most needed (Dickinson et al., 2003). An alternate suggestion was that superintendents should assess the students with disabilities in their districts and hire based on that need (Rascoe, 2007).

Copenhaver (2005) completed a study comparing the knowledge levels and comfort levels of principals who had special education degrees and those who did not. Those who had special education degrees proved to have a higher level of overall special education knowledge. Rascoe (2007) provided a study of 96 principals' educational background as it related to special education. This study indicated that principals who were skilled (possessed an educational background in special education) used a variety of sources for special education information,

while unskilled principals indicated that central office memos and special education staff were their primary sources of special education information (Rascoe, 2007). The Rascoe (2007) study offered a series of scenarios to principals for evaluation; although the areas of accommodations and graduation requirements resulted in incorrect answers from both skilled and unskilled principals, overall, skilled principals gave more correct responses with a higher degree of confidence than the unskilled principals.

This research supports the opinions of surveyed principals who had an endorsement in special education who reported that their educational background had prepared them to effectively supervise special education programs and staff (Rascoe, 2007). Special Education teachers in a Jacobs et al. (2004) study reported that their principals did not understand the work, challenges, or accomplishments of special education teachers. They also indicated that their principals were only able to provide minimal assistance with specific problems. Another benefit of having a principal who is knowledgeable about special education is having a principal who can understand and identify with parents of students with disabilities regarding special education issues (Katherman, 1998).

There is a healthy body of research regarding available principal preparation programs. As previously discussed, principal awareness of special education and special education issues is essential in creating and maintaining a successful school (Katherman, 1998). However, research by Angelle and Bilton (2009), Cooner et al. (2005), Hirth and Valesky (1991, 1992), Langley (1993), Monteith (1994), Patterson et al. (2000), and Rascoe (2007) indicates that principal preparation programs are lacking a substantial special education component. Most recently Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that 53% of principal preparation programs had no coursework in special education and an additional 32% only had one course in special education. Only 6%

of participants had taken three or more classes in special education. In a 1993 study of South Carolina graduate students Langley found that of 120 graduates currently working as administrators 75% had no formal training in special education. Patterson et al. (2000) found that, although the prevailing trend in special education is toward inclusion principal preparation programs are not changing their requirements for special education coursework.

Broyles (2004) reported that principals indicated that their training in special education was inadequate. They also indicated that they did not feel confident with Individual Education Programs (IEP) and IEP meetings. Weinstein (1989) found that administrators were not knowledgeable about the guidelines for student placement in special education or the procedures for exiting those programs. In Katherman (1998) principals who had completed special education courses as part of their administrators training were able to answer special education questions correctly more frequently and more reliably.

Colleges and universities need to design programs that focus on special education knowledge for individuals in supervisory programs (Rascoe, 2007). Angelle and Bilton (2009) note that novice administrators require training in special education foundations to serve as school leaders. In Langley (1993) 90% of the participants indicated that formal special education training was necessary in order to be a successful administrator. Ninety-seven percent also indicated that coursework in the administration of special education programs would be useful to extremely useful in dealing with special education issues, and 85% indicated that coursework in the administration of special education programs would be beneficial in performing their daily job duties (Langley, 1993).

Lowe and Brigham (2002) reviewed the place of special education in administrative preparation programs and determined that special education required special consideration in

principal preparation programs. Preparation in special education issues is necessary for principals to effectively lead schools and include students with disabilities in that environment (Lowe & Brigham, 2000). Katherman (2008) and Monteith (1994) concurred with Lowe and Brigham (2000) and suggested a course of study in principal preparation programs that would combine special education content and competencies with that of regular education. However, programs with significant portions of special education coursework are not prevalent in colleges and universities (Katherman, 2008). Currently reform efforts are underway to create principal preparation programs that are more unified (Gatty, McNutty, & Waters, 2002; Monteith, 1994).

One suggestion for reform is the use of internships that include a special education component (Rascoe, 2007). Angelle and Bilton (2009) reported that 70% of study participants' coursework did not include an internship. Of the 30% that did have an internship, 37% reported an internship of one semester or less. In addition, of those internships 67% spent less than 50 hours on special education and 25% spent zero hours on special education matters. Balt (2002) stresses that in order for school administrators to be effective in providing services for special education students, they must be provided opportunities to be trained in addressing the critical issues they face regarding special education students and services. Angelle and Bilton (2009) concluded that internships alone did not provide sufficient preparation for administrators to assume leadership roles in schools with students with disabilities.

Principal preparation programs must integrate special education coursework as well as field experience (Cooner et al., 2005). Even principals who only had one course in special education, reported an increase in their comfort levels when dealing with special education issues (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Embedding skills and knowledge into the existing curriculum would serve both the purpose of educating perspective principals about special education (Angelle &

Bilton, 2009) and avoid creating a rift between special education programs and regular education programs (Collins & White, 2002).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter the research design is explained as well as the methods by which the researcher collected data. The participants and the methods by which they were selected are explained. Also, an explanation of the instrumentation used is contained in this chapter as well as the methods used to record and analysis the data collected. Furthermore, the methods by which trustworthiness and internal validity are assured are explained.

The purpose of this study was to determine the common characteristics of principals who are effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The researcher in this study used interviews with special education administrators, principals, and teachers in an effort to determine common characteristics of principals who are effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The time students with disabilities spend in general education classrooms is increasing (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Likewise, the level of responsibility general education teachers and administrators must assume for those students is also increasing. Therefore, there is a growing need for general education teachers and administrators who are able to address the needs of students with disabilities (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). The researcher in this study attempted to define some the common characteristics in school principals that make them effective with special needs populations.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the common characteristics of principals who are perceived as being effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
2. What are the education and professional backgrounds of those perceived as effective in meeting the needs of special education students?

### **Qualitative Research Method**

Qualitative research uses inductive reasoning and naturalistic approaches to understand and describe phenomena (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative research is commonly used when the researcher desires to know the motives, background, or other details about the research subjects. Qualitative research is commonly conducted in primary settings through interacting with the research subjects, by interviewing and observing (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

### **Design of the Study**

There are a variety of research designs within the qualitative method including phenomenology, case studies, ethnography, and others. This study followed the design of grounded theory research. Grounded theory research is a format in which the researcher attempts to develop a theory from the data collected (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This approach is inductive in nature and requires that data be collected prior to developing a theory (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The theory is then derived from the data.

Based on the outline provided by Gall et al. (1996), the sampling process for this study was purposeful sampling of the homogeneous type and also employed the snowball sampling method. When using purposeful sampling the researcher seeks out participants who might have



the characteristics required by the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In this study those participants are special education directors who have first hand knowledge of the performance of the principals in their counties in regard to students with disabilities. Those participants were interviewed to determine what characteristics make an administrator effective in meeting the needs of special education students. The group was a homogeneous sample in regard to their common experiences and positions (Gall et al., 1996). The purpose of selecting this group homogeneous was to better study the participants' perceptions regarding principal practices in depth.

The interview portion of this study was conducted using a three-tier approach. The first tier consisted of each county's special education supervisor. The purpose of beginning with the special education supervisors was to get information regarding effective principals from the county faculty member who was assumed to know the most about which principals were effective with special education students. The second tier of the interview process was conducted with the principals recommended by the special education supervisors. For the purpose of triangulation, the principals were interviewed between the special education supervisors and teachers. Therefore, both the special education supervisors' and the teachers' interviews could support the comments made by the principals. The final tier of the interview process was to interview the teachers recommended by the principals. The teachers were able to speak to the effectiveness of their principals from the perspective of the faculty member who works directly with those students.

The special education directors were asked to provide the researcher with the names and schools of principals that he or she feels have had success in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. As discussed in Chapter 2, a method identified as effective by individual principals

was considered effective in a collective sense if it is identified by 50% or more respondents. Furthermore, the needs of special students were identified in Chapter 2 in terms of service being provided. Previous research identified a variety of suggestions for administrators seeking to provide effective services. These suggestions include providing effective instructional leadership (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998), providing individualized and quality instruction based on students' needs (Jimenez & Graf, 2008), engaging in collaborative decision making with the teachers involved in the instruction of special education students (Salisbury, 2006), and providing a safe and accepting environment in which those students are included (Jimenez & Graf, 2008).

The interview portion of the research employed snowball sampling. Although the participants were chosen with purpose, they were identified by the previous participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This type of sampling was used because it is an efficient way to identify other participants who may have the desired characteristics required by the study.

### **Instrument Description**

This study was conducted with the use of interviews. The purpose of using interviewing was to gain as much perceptual data as possible about the characteristics of administrators who are able to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The interviews were scheduled using semistructured questioning and included guided, open-ended questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

The interviews began with building a rapport with the interviewee by assuring them that all of their answers are confidential and thanking them for their participation (Gall et al., 1996). The interviewees were reminded of the purpose of the study and the process by which they were

to be interviewed, recorded, and asked to provide the contact information for relative principals. Any questions were addressed at that time, and the consent forms signed.

The interviews were designed with the interview guide approach. With this approach, the interviewer enters the interview with a guide of open-ended questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). This guide allows the interviewer to focus on certain specific topics, but the interviewer does not have to follow only the guide. The scope of questions can extend outside of the guide to offer the interviewer more in-depth responses. Also, the interviewer can change the wording of any of the questions to better match the flow of the interview. Probing is allowed if further clarification or examples are needed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). This approach is loosely structured in regard to the topics discussed and yet assures that specific topic are addressed in each interview (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

The interviews were conducted with special education directors first. They were asked to provide the contact information for 2 or 3 principals they think meet the research criteria. The principal interviews were conducted second, and they were asked to provide the contact information for 3 or 4 teachers in their buildings who would be able to discuss each principal's ability to meet the needs of special education students. Those teachers were interviewed last, using the same process as the special education directors and principals. Each interview was audio recorded and transposed by the interviewer to increase accuracy (Alreck & Settle, 1995).

### **Research Sites**

This study was conducted in the East Tennessee region. Special education directors from Cocke County, Lenior City, Loudon County, Blount County, Hamblen County, Maryville City, and Knox County were contacted to participate in the study. They were contacted via email and

telephone to procure permission to interview them. The director of schools in each district was also be contacted, via email and telephone to gain permission and inform them of the purposes of the study.

### **Pilot Testing**

A pilot test was administered in Sevier County. During the pilot test for the interviews the researcher looked for cues that the questions developed were leading or confusing and whether the interviewee was comfortable during the questioning (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). After the pilot interviews the schedule of questions was reviewed, but there did not seem to be a need to revise or delete any questions. Interview responses were tape recorded and transcribed to increase reliability (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The pilot test included an interview with the special education director, interviews with the 2 or 3 principals she identified, and the teachers each of those principals identified. The interview protocol (Appendix A) was designed for the special education directors and then adapted to be appropriate for use with the principals and teachers. The pilot protocols were adapted as needed throughout the pilot study and continued to evolve through the data collection process.

### **Data Analysis**

Because the responses to the interview questions could be highly varied, the interviews were segmented and coded in order to compile the data (Gall et al., 1996). Segmenting the data allowed the researcher to produce meaningful chunks of data from the transcripts and coding the segments allowed them to be easily manipulated and organized (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). As there was only be one researcher coding the data, intracoder reliability was very important.

Intracoder reliability is maintaining consistency within the single recorder. Being aware of the need for intracoder reliability increases the researcher's attention to this detail, therefore, increasing the intracoder reliability (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Two types of codes were used to disaggregate the interview data. This first were priori codes, which are codes the researcher developed from the research questions prior to collecting the interview data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The second type of codes were the inductive codes, which were developed by the researcher after the interview transcripts were segmented. The inductive codes were the result of the researcher's examination of the data. The combination of transcribing the interviews and segmenting and coding the interview data increased the validity of the study.

Validity or trustworthiness in qualitative designs is the degree to which the researcher and the participants agree on the researcher's description or interpretation of events (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). In order to increase validity this study employed "participant language and verbatim accounts" (p.325) and "mechanically recorded data" (p.326) to ensure that the participants' responses are not subject to the interviewer's interpretations prior to coding (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Coding of the data was done from the interview transcripts. Using the aforementioned methods increased the validity of this study.

Reliability, commonly referred to in qualitative research as rigor and quality, is equally important in assuring that research has credibility (Golafshani, 2003). Although generally considered to be part of quantitative research, reliability can be applied to qualitative research. In this study the reliability or consistency of measurement was increased by interviewing three different types of educators and by interviewing subjects in multiple counties. The study showed higher reliability because there were common responses from the special education directors,

principals, and teachers within each county. In addition there were common responses across different counties.

Triangulation is the method by which qualitative studies achieve reliability and validity (Golafshani, 2003). Triangulation is the method of using multiple sources, data collection techniques, “time periods, and theoretical schemes” to “cross-validate” qualitative research results (p.374) (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The purpose of triangulation is to find regularities in the data in order to increase consistency. The researcher in this study achieved triangulation by using multiple sources and three stages of interviews from each source. By comparing the perspectives of multiple school systems and multiple members of each school system, the researcher added quality to the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to identify administrators who are successful in meeting the needs of special education students and determine what characteristics they possess that facilitate that success. In order to achieve this purpose the researcher investigated these research questions:

1. What are the common characteristics of principals who are perceived as being effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
2. What are the education and professional backgrounds of those perceived as effective in meeting the needs of special education students?

The study was conducted in three different counties in the East Tennessee area. These counties were chosen by size and proximity to the researcher. The special education director in each county was interviewed to determine his or her definitions of effectiveness regarding principals working with special education students and to get their recommendations for principals in their counties to interview. The special education directors chose the principals to be interviewed based on their experiences with those principals.

#### **Special Education Directors**

Two special education directors suggested three principals; one principal from County 3 chose not to participate, and one special education director chose two principals, for a total of seven principals. When asked what characteristics of principals are effective in leading special

education students, all three of the special education directors cited a student-centered approach. The special education director from County 1 stated that effective principals have a philosophy that every child can learn while recognizing that they won't all learn the same. The special education directors from County 1 and County 3 noted an understanding of disabilities and how those disabilities affect student learning as an element of principal effectiveness and added that a background in special education was a valuable resource for principals. The special education director from County 3 stated:

In general, I think if they [school principals] have had some experience, those who have been in sped employment, who have been in that [special education] area of employment, I think that is an invaluable experience because they know what is required. They know what to expect. They know about modifications. They know about accommodations. They know about different behaviors. They know about different disabilities, and I think it is invaluable.

The special education director from County 2 added flexibility and open-mindedness to the list of effective principal attributes.

The special education directors were also asked why they chose the principals they did. The special education directors from County 1 and County 3 agreed that the principals they chose had more direct contact with special education students, and the special education director from County 1 added that those principals had a greater passion for teaching special education students. The special education director from County 1 also indicated that those principals remain calm and solve problems, have a more development approach to education, and focus more on student gains. The special education director from County 2 stated that the principals she chose were building strong community support and had a very accepting school culture.



## **Principals**

The principals who were recommended by the special education directors were interviewed next. The principals are identified by the following: County Number, Principal Number, i.e. County 1 Principal 2 (C1P2), County 3 Principal 1 (C3P1), etc. The principals were asked leading questions and allowed to expand. The researcher used a schedule of questions to ensure that all questions were answered, but not questions were asked outright, as the interviewees answered some questions without solicitation.

### **County 1**

Principal 1 and Principal 2 from County 1 were nearly parallel in their answers and experiences. Each of these schools was a middle school grades 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>. Both had professional and educational experience in special education as well as in administration. They also both indicated that those experiences and that training were valuable to their leadership skills because those experiences and training provided them with a background knowledge of special education that resulted in a feeling of preparedness when leading special education students. C1P1 and C1P2 both reported that their teachers were confident in their special education knowledge and were comfortable asking for their advice in teaching special education students.

Furthermore, C1P1 and C1P2 had direct daily contact with special education students outside of the office, in the students' classrooms and in the hallways. However, at the same time they indicated that they made an effort to treat special education students with the same respect and sociability as regular education students. C1P2 noted that he was proud to work in a school "that takes ownership of all students." C1P1 indicated that his drive was to provide academic excellence for all students. C1P1 stated, "I try to make it seem as seamless as possible where I

don't give any appearance of differentiation; even though I am differentiating based on federal law and the different procedures and practices.”

Positive parent interactions were also an important part of both principals' effectiveness. They responded that getting parent buy-in meant treating them with respect and giving parents a chance to speak their concerns. Finally, both C1P1 and C1P2 noted that they want all kids to have fun at school. C1P1 said, “I ask kids two questions routinely: What did you learn today and did you have fun?” C1P2 added, “School ought to be a fun place for everybody.”

C1P1 and C1P2 did have some answers that differed. C1P1's answers included enthusiasm, open-mindedness, and demeanor as important parts of his leadership. C1P2 stated that important parts of his principalship included being involved as an instructional leader and providing a continuum of services. C1P2 revealed, “We try to provide a continuum [of services] that kids can progress through. That they can move through. No matter where they come to us, we try to take them where they are and move them up the “[education scaffold]”. That's a catch phrase that we have used here for a long time. And it goes for regular education students, as well.” Both C1P1 and C1P2 had school mottos or “catch phrases” that they had developed in that school. C1P1 used the motto “[Bear Blast]” which he repeated numerous times. It is something the staff and students say to indicate that they have done a good job on something. C1P2 used the phrase “learning ladder” that the staff uses to remind themselves that students progress at different rates but they are all moving up academically.

## **County 2**

All principals recommended from County 2 were leaders of schools that served grades Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Principals in County 2 all agreed that being an instructional leader and having a good base of knowledge regarding special education were important tenets

of their effectiveness. C1P1 and C2P2 stated that they felt confident in the special education knowledge, especially regarding discipline, and all three principals stated that they believed their teachers were confident in their specific principal's knowledge as well. C2P1 and C2P3 both indicated that they had taught instructional labs during the past year, C2P1 in a reading lab and C1P3 in a math lab. All principals also agree that all students in their school should be treated fairly and as individuals. They responded that there should be no noticeable distinction between special education students and regular education students. C2P2 stated, "We try to ...recognize the kids as kids, not as special education kids, or CDC [Comprehensive Development Classroom] kids."

C2P1 and C2P2 noted that an important part of their leadership was creating a safe school environment where students felt comfortable and creating positive parent support and a sense of community. C2P1 indicated that he had nearly 98% parent support in his school, and C2P2 noted that she was working on growing parent support because it is very important to success. They both agree that the way to gain parent and community support is to be visible in the community, share information with parents, be proactive with parent contacts, and contact parents for positive reasons, not only negative reasons.

C2P1 and C2P3 agree that in order for a principal to be effective with special education students and all students, the principal should have direct contact with students in order to build relationships with students. They also expect their teachers to make an effort to get to know their students and build relationships with them. Both of these principals have a background in school counseling they credit with preparing them to be effective leaders. Methods of effectiveness that were found in only principal's responses included shared leadership between the principal and the teachers and having teachers who are confident in their knowledge of their curriculums.

### **County 3**

Two principals were interviewed in County 3 because the third principal declined to participate. The principals of these schools were one each from a high school and an elementary school serving grades Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup>. There were four points of effectiveness that the two principals from County 3 agreed upon. They both responded that having direct contact with special education students was important. C3P1 meets many students as they arrive at school and as they leave school. He states that this process gives them a good start and end to the day. He also added that many of his staff have seen him doing this process and have started doing it themselves. C3P2 indicated that she sometimes worked in classrooms to provide educational assistance. Her example was of a classroom that needed extra supervision for a particular student which the principal provided until the need had passed.

Both principals also indicated that they saw themselves as instructional leaders for their teachers by providing support and guidance in the field of instruction. They both strived to achieve a good report with parents by building trust and increasing the parents' level of comfort within the school. Both principals noted that modeling was an important part of their leadership. C3P1 indicated that his teachers have increased their direct contact with students as a result of his modeling, and C3P2 indicated that her teachers have increased their effectiveness with parents by following her model. The final point of effectiveness on which these two principals agree is that the school's teachers should take ownership of all the students in the school, including special education students. C3P1 states that he is effective because visitors to the school would not be able to identify the students who are special education from the students who are only regular education.

C3P1 added that his special education knowledge and background have contributed to his effectiveness. He also noted that having a good report with special education students and wanting students to feel comfortable in school as part of his effectiveness. C3P2 added a variety of points to her plan for effectiveness including good knowledge of special education, building trust with parents, being eager to learn, and making her teachers aware of her expectations. C3P2 indicated that she has no formal training in special education but feels like some training would increase her effectiveness.

### **Common Themes from All Principals**

While evaluating all principals' responses, several themes emerged. The most prevalent themes were direct contact with students, treating all students equally or taking ownership of special education students, the principal serving as an instructional leader, building relationships with parents, and having a competent degree of special education knowledge.

**Major Themes.** Six out of seven principals interviewed indicated that direct contact with students was an important part of effectiveness. The one principal who did not specifically mention this point was C2P2. C1P1, C1P2, and C3P1 had direct contact with students by visiting them in their classrooms and in the hallways. C2P1 and C2P1 each taught an academic lab during the school year, and C3P2 had direct contact with students by being present in the classroom when assistance was needed. C2P1 stated, "I do my paperwork in the morning and after school. I spend the day with my kids."

In addition six out of seven of the principals interviewed, less C2P3, indicated that they thought it was important to treat all students equally and to not differentiate openly between special education students and regular education students. C1P2 stated, "When they are going down the hallway, we don't have them labeled or numbered or a sign on their head that says

“I’m disabled”. Whether they are identified or not, we want the same things for them.” C3P2 referred to this phenomenon as “[assuming] ownership of special education students.” C1P2 stated about his school, “It is great working in a school that takes ownership of those [special education] kids. It is a school culture that takes care of everybody. I am proud of that. I am proud of them.”

Another theme that was shared by all but one principal was being an instructional leader for all students, with the one outlier being C1P1. C3P1 and C3P2 indicated that they served as instructional leaders by providing guidance and support in academic instruction. C1P2 and C2P1 mentioned that they were having meetings later those days with specific teachers who needed to increase their instructional effectiveness.

The next theme indicated by six principals, less C2P3, was building relationships with parents. C1P1 shared:

I am out kissing babies, shaking hands, building relationships. Giving parents an update on what is happening at the school, and thanking them for having their children ready to take the TCAPs. Informing parents that we hold their kids to a higher expectation. Talking with them, making them feel welcome and feel that their kids are welcome. Parents come to school when they are not happy, and I try to listen. I want to do things that demonstrate that we are building relationships.

C2P1 had a more informal take on building relationships with parents:

It is all about building those relationships. It is my having a bologna sandwich at the country store, and asking parents in a non-defensive way, ‘What can we do better? What do you like about our school?’ I find out a lot. There is a lot of informal surveys when I go eat in these little areas.”

The special education director in County 2 mentioned that C2P1 and C2P2 were both working hard on building relationships with their students’ parents in an effort to gain parent support and participation. C1P1 noted that he believes his school has 98% parent participation at this time.

The final theme indicated by six principals, not including C3P1, was having a competent degree of special education knowledge. C2P2 and C2P3 indicated that they felt like they had a high level of special education that was derived from participating in special meetings, reading pertinent literature, and drawing on the expertise of their special education department. C3P2 also credited her special education department, as well as her special education director, for adding to her level of special education competency. C1P1 and C1P2 stated that their experiences teaching special education students in the classroom was valuable to their levels of knowledge. C1P1 was a Comprehensive Development Classroom teacher, Superintendent of Schools, and principal of an alternative school that specializes in behavior challenged students. That alternative school had a high number of special education students. C1P2 served as a teacher for intellectually gifted students, a disability category in the state of Tennessee (cite), as well as serving as the Special Education Director for his county. He stated, “I got to see a lot of different techniques [in the Special Education Director position] and a chance to form a philosophy of what meets the needs of students, especially those with disabilities.”

**Minor Themes.** Five principals indicated that building relationships with students was important to effectiveness, not including C2P2 and C2P3. C1P2 said, “I want to make personal contact with them [the students]. I keep up with what they are doing. Ask them to tell me what they are doing. What they are learning and so on.” C3P1 meets with many students at the beginning and end of every day to check on them, ask them how they are doing, and help meet their instructional and personal needs.

Modeling was also mentioned by five principals. All five principals indicated that they model the behaviors they want to see in their staff. C3P1 modeled meeting with students in the mornings and afternoons and says that now his school counselors and some teachers are also

meeting students at those times. C1P1 stated that he models enthusiasm and a positive demeanor. He interacts with special education students in the hallways and he sees an increase in the amount that other teachers interact with them as well. C3P2 models her expectations for service to her teachers. She notes that she and her teachers are now a more uniform unit when meeting with parents.

Safety was listed by four principals as an element of effectiveness. According to C1P1, “We provide educational excellence for all students, where we maximize the academic potential of every student, in a safe and personalized environment.” As added by C2P2, “I have a vision for the whole school that the kids are in a comfortable, safe learning environment.”

Community support was stressed by C2P1 and C2P2. C2P2 shared that she is working on increasing the sense of community in her school in an effort to increase achievement. Her special education director also mentioned the steps she is taking to gain community support.

C2P1 stated that his school is already heavily involved in the community:

My community loves after school events. We do book scavenger hunts and bingo for books. This our community. If you can remove this school from the community and it still be the same place then it is not doing it’s job. I think of this school as a dual function. I educate kids and parents, and this is their community center. This is their community spot.

There were also emergent themes regarding the background experiences and education of the principals who were interviewed. Four principals, C1P1, C1P2, C2P2, and C3P1, had both degrees in a field of special education and experience teaching special education. C1P2 had served as the Special Education Director. Both C1P1 and C1P2 served as the Superintendent of Schools that they remarked was a very special education heavy position. C2P2 taught inclusion classes in another state. C3P1 and C1P1 taught behavior modification classes involving special education students.



Two principals had both degrees in and experience as school counselors. C2P1 has a master's degree in school counseling and identifies himself as "an instructional leader with a counseling degree." C2P1 indicates that his background in counseling gives him "an edge" over other administrators. C2P3 also has a degree in counseling and worked as a school counselor for 10 years.

The final principal has a background in criminal justice which she believes aids her in the performance of her duties because she is able to look at research analytically. She notes, "I would have liked to have additional training in SPED [special education] as a classroom teacher, not in the perfect world of academia in college."

### **Teachers**

At the conclusion of each interview with a principal, the principal was asked to recommend 3 or 4 teachers who would be able to speak to the principal's leadership ability regarding special education students. The teachers are identified by the following: County Number, Principal Number, Teacher Number, i.e. County 1 Principal 2 Teacher 3 (C1P2T3), County 3 Principal 1 Teacher 2 (C3P1T2), etc. In this way, each teacher's response can be attributed to his or her principal and county.

#### **County 1**

Six teachers were interviewed from County 1, four at the school of C1P1 and two from the school of C1P2. Interviews with teachers from County 1 resulted in a variety of common themes. There were two themes shared by all respondents from both schools related to the effectiveness of the principals regarding special education. The first was that both principals

were supportive all of their teachers. According to C1P1T2 each semester teachers have an individual meeting with the administration:

He [C1P1] is very supportive to the teachers. This year they had [Stop in with the Staff]. One semester you talk to the VP and the next you talk to the Principal. They would set aside 15-20 minutes to talk to each teacher and just see if they had any concerns or needs or suggestions. That meant a lot to teachers. That time.

C1P2T1 says about C1P2, “He is very supportive of the staff, but he also has expectations. He expects me to have done my job in order for him to back me up, and I know that.”

All six respondents from County 1 also agree that having a background in special education increases the principal’s knowledge base and preparedness when addressing special education issues or students. C1P1T4 stated that her principal’s background in special education made her principal very well versed in special education law and applicable disciplinary procedures. She added that his background in special education increased his knowledge of parents’ rights, as well. Regarding C1P2, C1P2T1, a special education teacher, stated that his principal’s “understanding of what we go through and what the students go through is extremely helpful when he’s in there helping us make decisions.”

There were also themes that were consistent between the two principals but not identified by all teachers. These themes included (teachers identifying aforementioned themes are in parentheses): having positive relationships with students (C1P1T2, C1P1T3, C1P2T1, C1P2T2), supporting teachers in providing high quality instruction (C1P1T4, C1P1T2, C1P2T1, C1P2T2), having a positive attitude about special education (C1P2T2, C1P1T1, C1P1T3, C1P1T4), and being understanding of special education students’ needs (C1P1T2, C1P1T1, C1P2T2).

There were also two teachers who indicated that they requested to transfer schools to be under the administration of the identified principal. Both teachers from the school of C1P2 indicated that the principal was informed of day-to-day activities but was not overbearing.

However, no teachers from the school of C1P1 indicated this point. Three out of four teachers from the school of C1P1 indicated that he was successful with parent communication. No teachers from the school of C1P2 indicated that he was successful with parent communication.

## **County 2**

Nine teachers were interviewed from County 2, three from each school. There was one theme on which all teachers from County agreed, parent communication. All teachers indicated parent communication was an important part of their principal's successful administration. Teachers from the school of C2P2 indicated that increasing parent participation was a primary goal of their principal, while teachers from the school of C2P1 noted that parent participation continued to be a goal of their principal even though the parent participation in that school is already high.

There were three themes shared by at least one teacher from each school in County 2: providing high quality instruction, being flexible, and a willingness to listen. Eight of nine teachers from County 2, less C2P2T2, affirmed that supporting teachers in providing high quality instruction was a goal of their principal. C2P1T3 stated, "If it is at all possible to help me he will. If he has to talk to the central office or the special education office about something he will do that. He will come in [my classroom] and help if he needs to."

One teacher from each of the three principal's schools (C2P1T1, C2P2T3, C2P3T2) indicated that being flexible was an element of effectiveness when administering to special education students. C2P3T2 stated that her principal was very flexible in allowing the inclusion and special education teachers the freedom to accommodate and modify classes or assignments as needs for special education students.

A willingness to listen was also noted by teachers from each school. Five teachers (C2P1T2, C2P1T3, C2P2T2, C2P2T3, C2P3T1) shared that a willingness to listen contributed to their principal's effectiveness. According to C2P2T2:

I may not always agree with things she wants to do, but I'm always willing to listen and be open, and on her part, as well. She is always willing to listen, you know, if you have any suggestions or whatever, she is always willing to listen and work with you, or whatever, and that what being a good leader is all about, I think.

There were multiple themes that were consistent between the schools of C2P2 and C2P3 including being supportive of teachers (C2P2T1, C2P2T2, C2P3T1, C2P3T2), understanding the role and job duties of special education teachers (C2P2T1, C2P2T2, C2P3T1), including special education students as part of the school culture (C2P2T1, C2P2T3, C2P3T3), and supporting inclusion (C2P2T1, C2P3T2).

There were also a couple of themes that were mentioned by multiple teachers in one school but only regarding one principal. For example, two teachers (C2P2T1, C2P2T2 ) in the school of C1P2 included having a community environment as part of their principals effectiveness. Teachers C2P2T1 and C2P2T3 also included understanding diversity as part of their principal's effectiveness. Two teachers (C2P3T1, C2P3T2) from the school of C2P3 added that their principal was effective by monitoring their teaching but not trying to control their teaching.

### **County 3**

There were two schools included in County 3 and five total teachers, two teachers associated with C3P1 and three teachers associated with C3P2. In County 3 there was one element of a successful administration that was agreed upon by all teachers: good communication with parents. C3P2T2 stated that C3P2 was able to develop a positive report with parents, relate to them, and work with them to solve problems and find solutions. C3P1T2 shared that her principal is constantly on the phone making calls to parents for positive and

negative reasons. She said that he is well-received by parents and gets good parent response, especially for a secondary school.

There were two themes shared by at least one teacher from both schools: being supportive of teachers (C3P1T1, C3P1T2, C3P2T3) and understanding the duties of teachers (C3P1T1, C3P1T2, C3P2T3). There were three themes shared by the two teachers (C3P1T1, C3P1T2) at the school of C3P1: letting the teachers teach, having a background in special education, and being visible to teachers and students within the school. There were two themes shared by two of the three teachers (C3P2T1, C3P2T2) at the school of C3P2: having an awareness of special education law and supporting teachers in providing high quality instruction.

### **Common Themes from All Teachers**

Although no element of a successful administration was agreed on by all teachers from all counties, there were five elements that were common among all counties.

**Major Themes.** Themes that were common amongst all counties are considered major themes. The most prevalent element of an administration that is successful with special education students according to teachers was pursuing good communication with parents. Seventeen teachers reported that good communication with parents was essential and that their respective principals had either achieved good communication skills with parents or were pursuing good communication skills with parents. C2P2T2 teaches in a school that is working to increase parent communication and participation. She said, “They [the parents] want people who will listen and communicate clearly with them. And try to help them. So that is what we try to do here.” Conversely, C2P1T2 teaches at a school that already has a good report with parents and is currently working to maintain that high level of support. He reports that:

C2P1 especially, has created a monster of support from the community for this school. This school has been “this close” to being shut down because of the numbers. Now, there is no way

they could shut us down because it is just too great, and it is because of C2P1. He has created an atmosphere here of caring, of creativity, of ways to get people involved. Parents are all the time rolling in here and doing everything they can, and you can't beat that. If you've got parents that care, your kids are gonna improve also, because they are getting it here, they are getting it at home, and they are gonna be the best, and that's all that matters.

The next most popular theme that emerged from all counties was having principals support teachers in providing high quality instruction. Fourteen teachers expressed this point.

C1P1T2 noted about C1P1:

That [high quality instruction] is really important to him. To have effective teachers. He goes in and out of the classrooms, and talks to students. You know if you really wanna know how things are in the classroom, ask the students, and he does that. He is working really hard to get new programs and technology in our school.

C2P1T3 shared that her principal strongly supports 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading every day. She added that he works hard to protect that time and not schedule any events that might distract from reading instruction and encourages his teachers not to interrupt that time either.

Another teacher in that school, C2P1T1, added that C2P1 "is really good about holding everything off for TCAPS [Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program], or reading. We don't have the fire marshal coming in the middle of reading or the drug dogs coming in the middle of Math. He schedules it to where we hold as much as possible off until TCAPS are over. We have 1 ½ hours of reading every day, and he is really good about protecting that time."

Having principals who are supportive of teachers was another major theme that emerged from all counties. Thirteen teachers agreed that having a principal who was supportive of all teachers, including special education teachers, was an essential element of an effective leadership. C1P2T1 is a Resource classroom and inclusion teacher. He noted this about his principal's level of support for the special education teachers:

He [C1P2] has been a sped supervisor in the past, so he has the experience in dealing with those students and the laws, and supports us. His background and the fact that he has empathy for their cause, and what we are trying to do. That means a lot. If you have a principal who is not too

gun ho on special education because they look at that as a burden or a problem. That is a huge difference from a principal that understands that we have the needs and whether it's by law or not, but the law pushes it, but we have to serve those needs, that makes a big difference, just that attitude.

Teachers in C3P1's school, which consisted of one special education teacher and one regular education inclusion teacher, noted that he is always informed about current teaching methods, technology, and learning styles. They added that he is willing to provide them with any teaching materials or supports that they need to teach special education and regular education students.

The fourth most popular theme amongst teachers is having a principal who knowledgeable about special education law, policy, and procedure. The teachers from the school of C3P2 all agreed that having a principal who was knowledgeable about special education policy made them feel confident in taking her advice on teaching special education students, in following her recommendations for special education programming, and in considering her input during meetings with parents of special education students. They added that they believed that her knowledge level made her more aware of their job duties and roles which also increased their confidence in her leadership. C3P1T2 said that she feels comfortable going to her principal for advice on modifying and accommodating for her special education students because of his background knowledge and experience in special education. She referred to a specific instance in which she was teaching multiple students who had dyslexia. She went to the principal for advice on how to modify her lessons so that they could read the material. C3P1 suggested photocopying the readings onto blue paper. C3P1T2 was astonished at the difference the blue paper made in those students' abilities to read independently. She said, "That is not really something you think about going to your principal for, but you should be able to."

The final theme shared by all counties was that successful principals should monitor the classroom but not control instruction. There were two teachers from each county who expressed

this point, for a total of six. Each county's teachers used slightly different language to express this point. Teachers from County 1 said their principals were aware of what is going on in the classroom but do not spend time "looking over their shoulders." Teachers from County 2 referred to this phenomenon by saying that their principals monitored but did not control what is happening in their classrooms. C3P1T1 and C3P1T2 from County 3 were quoted as saying that C3P1 "let's his teachers teach."

**Minor Themes.** Minor themes were found in two counties. The teachers in County 2 and County 3 agreed that having a principal who understood the job duties and roles of special education teachers was an important part of those principals' successes administering special education students. C3P1T2 stated that her principal was not that far removed from the classroom and that he makes it a point to ensure that his teachers do not feel overwhelmed or take on more than they can handle. Teachers in County 1 and County 3 agreed that having a special education background was an important part of a successful leadership. All the teachers in County 1 mentioned having a background in special education as benefit to principals. In addition, all the teachers working for C3P1, who has a background in special education, mentioned his background as a positive aspect of his leadership. Teachers mentioned that those principals with experience in special education had a greater knowledge base from which to draw and were able to make decision regarding programming and discipline more quickly and more accurately than other principals they have worked under who did not have special education backgrounds.

There were also themes that emerged from only one county. Themes from County 1 included building relationships with students, having a positive attitude about special education, and being understanding. Themes from County 2 were building a community environment,



understanding diversity, accepting special education students as part of the school culture, supporting inclusion, being flexible, and being willing to listen. The one theme that emerged from only County 3 was being visible to students and teachers within the school environment.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 4 the study findings and apparent themes were present. In Chapter 5, the researcher discusses the conclusions drawn from the research presented in Chapter 4. Answers to the research questions are reviewed, and the researcher summarizes the major findings and interpretations of the data. Furthermore, the researcher compares the results to current literary findings and proposes further research to follow this study. Finally, the researcher provides a summary and conclusion of the study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify administrators who were successful in meeting the needs of special education students and to determine what characteristics they possessed that facilitated success. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the common characteristics of principals who are perceived as being effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities?
2. What are the education and professional backgrounds of those perceived as effective in meeting the needs of special education students?

In order to answer these questions a qualitative study was conducted. I interviewed three school district special education directors, who in turn provided the names of two or three principals per district whom they perceived to be effective administrators for special education students. After interviewing each principal, the principal provided the names of two to four teachers in their schools who could speak to their administrative effectiveness.

#### **Summary of the Findings**

##### **Special Education Directors**

The special education department directors who were interviewed were first asked what qualities they thought constituted effectiveness. The majority of respondents agreed that having a student-centered approach, having direct contact with special education students, and having an

understanding of disabilities and how those disabilities affect student learning were essential elements to effectiveness. Therefore, these qualities are assumed to be consistent among all principals recommended for the study. I was unable to locate any previous research on the topic of specific characteristics that special education directors found to be effective in school administrators.

## **Principals**

There were six themes that emerged from the interviews with principals that were agreed upon by 86% of principals interviewed. The first common theme was that the majority of principals interviewed had direct contact with special education students. Secondly, the majority of principals interviewed indicated that taking responsibility for special education students was a fundamental element of successfully leading those students. Thirdly, those principals served as instructional leaders for special education students and their teachers. Furthermore, those principals noted that building relationships with parents and having a high degree of competency in addressing the needs of special education students were critical. Finally, the majority of the principals interviewed noted that providing services and helping to develop programs that meet the needs of children with disabilities were essential elements of their administrations.

Six out of seven principals interviewed agreed that direct contact with students aids effectiveness. Jimenez and Graf (2008) suggested that when principals have more direct contact with special education students, those students are more frequently accepted into the school culture. The teachers of C1P1 support this assertion by saying that they can see that because C1P1 spends time in the special education rooms and in the hallway talking to special education students, the regular education students are more comfortable talking and working with special education students. Furthermore, when principals are not actively involved with special

education programs on a daily basis, they frequently rely on third party sources like special education staff for information regarding special education and students with disabilities (Cooner, Tochtermann, & Garrison-Wade, 2005; DeClue, 1990). In many of the schools I researched the teachers and principals indicated they have a collaborative relationship. Teachers from the school C3P1 indicated that they routinely sought out his expertise in modifying and accommodating for their special education students. C2P2T2 said that the special education teachers and principal in that school met regularly to collaborate on ideas for instruction, behavior management, and special education services. Therefore, having a principal who has direct contact with the special education students can change the relationship between the principal and the special education staff from a one-sided relationship to a collaborative relationship. A comprehensive study of teachers and principals from 24 schools determined that an instructional leadership model in which the teachers and administrators worked collaboratively was more effective than other leadership models (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Another common element of these successful principals was encouraging all teachers in the school to accept responsibility for the special education students. C3P2 noted that her vision for her entire school included increasing the degree to which regular education teachers perceived special education students and regular education students as one entity. One principal, from a Heckert (2009) study, reported that she was able to gradually change the mind-set of her teachers and create a collaborative environment in which student outcomes increased by “continually reminding teachers that special education students belong to every teacher.” (p.91).

The principals also identified themselves as instructional leaders for teachers of special education students. Blasé and Blasé (2004) characterized this type of instructional leadership as being defined by a principal who is actively involved in making curriculum decisions and who is

spending time in the classroom as a leader in creating educational programs. C1P2 says of his role as instructional leader, “I have become more directly involved than I have before. I am finding out what I don’t know, as far as what kind of instruction goes on in the classroom. Trying to lead teachers through what I think will work as compared to what they are comfortable with doing.” When asked if C2P3 perceived her self as an instruction leader, she responded thusly:

Absolutely! No doubt about it! I look at their [the special education teachers] lesson plans every week, just like I look at everyone else’s lesson plans every week. In the K-2 room, they are learning skills to help them participate in school, so I look at what kind of instruction they are receiving for those skills. How are you teaching them bathroom skills? How are you teaching them to wait their turn? Cause those are hard skills to learn too. And they are not as easy for them as they might be for other kindergarteners coming in. But I do see myself as an instructional leader because I look at what they are teaching, and I look to see the results of that from assessments.

This study shows that serving as an instructional leader is perceived an important facet of effectiveness by principals who administer to special education students and teachers of special education students. Meek addressed the importance of serving as an instructional leader in a 2000 study. He found that a positive correlation exists between the principals’ instructional leadership skills and the achievement of the students.

One element of successful leadership identified by principals that was not addressed by previous research was pursuing good communication with parents. In my research, I determined that this is a very important area for principals and teachers of students with disabilities. C1P1 stressed the importance of building relationships with parents:

I am out kissing babies, shaking hands, building relationships. Giving parents an update on what is happening at the school, and thanking them for having their children ready to take the TCAPs. Informing parents that we hold their kids to a higher expectation. Talking with them, making them feel welcome and feel that their kids are welcome.

C1P1 also indicates that parent support and communication is an invaluable contributor to his school's success. His teachers agree. C1P1T2 stated, "Support breeds success, and success breeds support."

Finally, principals agreed that having a competent level of special education knowledge was a significant contributor to their successful administrations. Four of the principals interviewed mentioned that they had background experience and training in special education. They report that those experiences attribute in large part to their knowledge of special education and to their success. C1P1 stated that his experiences as a principal at an alternative school gave him a good knowledge base when addressing behavior problems, suspensions and expulsions. C1P2 stated that he has witnessed the evidence that his teachers believe that he has the necessary level of knowledge, "They come to me when they have questions about what to do with students. I don't see them going to another principal who didn't have the background or experience and saying, 'What do I do?'"

### **Teachers**

A series of studies including Reitzug (1994), Meek (2000), Marks and Printy (2003), and Heckert (2009) have focused on the affects of effective leadership on teachers. However, teachers of students with disabilities were not specifically targeted. Nor was the perception of special education teachers have of their principal's leadership addressed by previous research. This study explored the perceptions of special education personnel of their principals' effectiveness with special education leadership.

One theme that emerged from the interviews with teachers, as well as with principals, was good communication with parents. Seventy-three percent of the teachers interviewed indicated that their principals were pursuing good communication with parents and that this

element aided in making their administrations successful. C2P2T2 stressed that her principal was working extremely hard to improve parent relations in her school. She knew that their school had very little parent participation in the past, but that C2P2 has made increasing parent support a priority. C1P1T2 stated that her principal was also working on improving parent participation and communication. She said:

Right now we are trying to get parent involvement. We are trying to be very family friendly. In the past, this school was not quite as welcoming as the parents would have wanted it to be, so this year, a lot of parents have said how important it is to see the administration, for example, at sporting events. He tries to get parents to come in. We had a carnival, which we have had in the past but we had many more parents come this year than before. Next year, we are going to do a BBQ. And there is a new parent committee. That is one of the things that he has really improved.

Another theme that emerged from teachers was that their principals were effective in supporting them in providing high quality instruction. This theme is congruent to the theme expressed by principals that they believe being an instructional leader is important to effectiveness. Instructional leaders must also have knowledge of effective instruction, assessment, and discipline in order to provide high quality support and feedback to teachers of students with disabilities. (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998). The principals included in this study are successful in this area because they have a high degree of background knowledge and are working as instructional leaders in the classrooms of students with disabilities.

According to previous studies, being an instructional presence in the classroom can also increase student achievement. The administration is responsible for facilitating success in the classroom by providing the teachers with planning time, professional development, support, and instructional leadership so that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to provide high quality instruction (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Crockett, 2004; DiPaolo & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Teachers in this study indicated that they are receiving all of these elements that are necessary in

order for them to provide high quality instruction. The special education teachers in the school of C2P2 noted that she has arranged the schedule to provide the special education teachers with a common planning time and an entire day per week, every week, in order to complete all of the duties required by their jobs that do not include instructing students like writing Individualized Education Plans. Teachers at the school of C3P1 stated that their principal is very open to giving them professional time to attend professional development opportunities and encourages them to share what they learn with their colleagues. C1P2T1 stated that his principal provides some of their professional development himself and that one of his presentations on poverty has changed the outlook of many of the teachers in the school for the better.

Being knowledgeable about special education was another theme that emerged from teachers. Klingner et al. (2001) found that academic outcomes for students with disabilities and students at-risk improve when principals demonstrate a working knowledge of special education. Teachers interviewed in this study agree. They cited that their principals were well informed regarding special education policy and procedure. Those who worked for principals who had a background in special education attributed their knowledge to those experiences. C2P3T3 noted that her principal had a background in school counseling and she indicated that experience to be an attribute to her principal's leadership. Two other teachers, C2P1T1 and C3P2T3, stated that their principals were knowledgeable about special education because they sought out pertinent information about special education. C2P1's special education director even noted that he requests to go to "the special education legal conference every year."

Also, teachers reported that principals who are supportive of teachers are more effective with special education students. In order to be supportive of the schools' special education professionals, the principals must understand effective practices regarding students with



disabilities and be aware of the instructional demands placed on classroom teachers (Gersten et al., 2001; Gonzalez, 1996; Lillie & Lesane, 2004; Wald, 1998). Many of the teachers interviewed stated that their principals were knowledgeable about effective practices because they had background knowledge in special education or were conscientious in educating themselves about special education. In addition, seven teachers indicated that their principals were aware of all of their job duties and made it possible for them to do their jobs well. C2P2T2 responded when asked if her principal understood the job responsibilities of a special education teacher:

Yes, for the first time ever, we actually have a planning day, so on our planning day, we try to pull out any children who need to be tested, schedule meetings, you know, paper work. Before, they've not had that and it has really been very stressful for the resource staff to get everything done and do it properly. She listens and works with us, and she even, what was so great, she made our schedules. She helped us get everything in order, so that when school started, we didn't have to waste a lot of time doing that, and the kids were able to go ahead and get their instruction. Instead of having to wait a week or two, we jumped right in within just a few days, and we were in the classrooms doing inclusion.

There was one additional theme that was addressed by teachers but that was not mentioned in the literature. Teachers responded that an effective leader monitors but does not control classrooms and instruction. The teachers indicated that they appreciated input and direction from their principals. They also indicated that they respected their principals for being present in the classroom and visible in the school, and they reported that their principals allowed them the freedom to teach as they believe best for their students. This freedom indicated to the teachers that the principals respected them and trusted their abilities. A teacher from the school of C3P2 stated that she felt like her principal provides her with any resource she needs. She added that, "She gives me my space and lets me do what I need to do. In meetings, she supports what I say. The principals that I appreciate are the ones who have confidence in my work and trust my decisions."

## **Conclusions**

This study focused on determining the characteristics of principals who are perceived to be effective in administering to students with disabilities and the education and professional backgrounds of those principals who were found to be effective. The most significant conclusion is that the characteristics of being student-centered and knowledgeable about special education are beneficial to a principal who is seeking to be effective at leading special education students. Directors, principals, and teachers agreed on these two qualities. However, the absence of a certain element in individual interviews does not indicate that element is absent in that school. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions.

Of those principals who were identified as effective, more than half had previous educational and professional experience in special education. Every teacher of a principal who had a background in special education mentioned that background as an asset to their principal's leadership. Those principals indicated that background knowledge in special education prepared them for their current positions as administrators. One administrator who had no background in special education mentioned that she would have liked to have had training as a special education classroom teacher before she began her principalship because she said that she would be better prepared for the challenges of being a principal to special education students and teachers.

This study was able to provide a contrasting perspective relative to prior research. For example, Bays and Crockett (2007) found that rural elementary principals dispersed the responsibility for special education among the educators in the schools. This dispersion of responsibility generally weakened the instructional leadership for students with disabilities

because the administration was minimally involved in the program planning for the special education students and had little interaction with their teachers. However, the successful administrators I interviewed took responsibility for their special education departments and were, therefore, strong instructional leaders who were deeply involved in program planning for special education students and had frequent contact with special education teachers, students, and parents.

Furthermore, special education teachers indicate that they are hindered by unsupportive working conditions, administrators with unrealistic expectations, and inadequate leadership (Crockett, 2004). The respondents in this study report the opposite effect. They experienced principals who provided supportive working conditions, high but attainable expectations, and more than adequate leadership for special education teachers and students. These teachers reported that they were energized to come to work and excited about teaching students. C2P2T2 expressed:

She [C2P2] has given me a new lease on my teaching. This is my 21<sup>st</sup> year, and I've done CDC for so many years, and you know, you kinda get burned out. I was sedentary. I sat back in the classroom. I'm not saying I didn't think I was a good teacher but she sparked a fire in me that I needed rekindled, and most of the other teachers will tell you the same thing. And I think it has made me a better teacher. It has made me do a better job with the children. I'm really happy about that.

Multiple teachers expressed that they requested to transfer to their current schools because they had worked for their principals before and enjoyed working for them so much that they were willing to transfer to a different school.

In addition, research indicates that principals who have not been trained in special education harbor negative attitudes about assuming additional responsibilities for special education and students with disabilities (Olsen, 1992). This research shows that principals who have been trained in special education have positive attitude about assuming those

responsibilities. Teachers reported that their positive attitudes regarding special education have even tricked down to staff and students.

This research was focused on the perceptions of teachers of students with disabilities. As such, the research supports that many of the characteristics of principals who are effective with general education teachers are also effective with special education teachers. However, the principal must ensure that he or she apply those skills to special education teachers and students, not only general education teachers and students.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study was conducted in three school systems in East Tennessee by means of interviewing Special Education Directors, school principals, and teachers. The purpose of this study was to identify administrators who are successful in meeting the needs of special education students and determine characteristics they possess that facilitate success. This study fulfilled that purpose by identifying several characteristics of principals who are effective in meeting needs of special education students. These characteristics include: having direct contact with special education students, taking responsibility for special education students, serving as an instructional leader, building relationships with parents, and having a high degree of competency in addressing the needs of special education students, providing services and helping to develop programs that meet the needs of children with disabilities.

One of the most surprising elements of this study was the zeal with which the principals and teachers carried out their duties. The directors of special education were quick to identify the principals that they considered effective and to describe the characteristics that made those principals effective. Every principal suggested was very willing to be interviewed and took the

time to answer my questions fully, and the teachers interviewed spoke very highly of their principals and were pleased to be working for them.

This researcher recommends that school superintendents, principals and teachers read and use this research to better equip themselves to serve as leaders for a growing population of students with special needs. Furthermore, this researcher has identified several ways in which future researchers could build on this study to increase the breadth of information available on the topic of effective leadership for students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This researcher determined that there are common characteristics of principals who are successful with special education students and that the majority of those principals have professional and educational experience in the field of special education. The following recommendations for practice stem from this study:

- When applying for teaching positions, special education teachers should consider the leadership characteristics of the principals at the schools they choose and seek out principals who have leadership characteristics that are effective in leading special education students and teachers.
- Principals without special education training and experience should seek opportunities to learn more about special education.
- Principals should endeavor to better understand their special education students and staff by having direct contact with them.
- Principals should attend conferences and training related to special education law, policy, and procedures.

- When selecting principals and having a choice between a candidate with special education experience and one without it, the director of schools or the selection committee should strongly consider the one with experience in special education.

Rascoe (2007) suggested that state departments should support local education agencies by funding and implementing programs where school districts can train special education teachers to be administrators. As a result the local education agency would have a ready supply of administrators who were trained and experienced in special education. This research shows that having background knowledge in special education improves a principal's leadership skills regarding that population. Therefore, this research supports such a program because it would provide districts with principals who have the necessary background experiences to be effective leaders for students with disabilities and their teachers.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research provides only a small part of the variety of research that could be conducted on the subject of effective principalship regarding special education students.

Therefore, recommendations for further research include, but are not limited to:

- Further qualitative study that would expand the study size to include a variety of states and school systems in order to better determine what leadership skills might be effective with special education students nationwide.
- A quantitative study of the specific outcomes of students with disabilities on standardized assessments during years in which they were students of an administrator who had no special education background or experience as compared to years during which they were students of an administrator who was experienced in special education.

- A comparative study of the performance on standardized assessments of students with disabilities between schools where the principal is experienced in special education and schools in which the principal is not experienced in special education.

Additional research on the topic of the effective characteristics of principals regarding students with disabilities will increase the breadth of knowledge available in this area and provide further sources for teachers and administrators when attempting to increase their effectiveness with special education populations.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions for Special Education Administrators**

1. What does it mean for a principal to be “effective” in administering to special education students?
2. What characteristics of a principal make him/her effective in administering special education students?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Questions for Principals**

1. The special education director in your county has identified you as a principal who is effective at administering to special education students. Do you see yourself that way?
2. What do you think it means to be an effective administrator for special education students?
3. Do you perceive yourself as an instructional leader for students with disabilities?
4. Describe your special education program. (RTI, Inclusion, pull-out, mixed)
5. Do you have a common vision for your special education program that is shared by all the teachers in your school?
6. Do you believe that you are effective when communicating with the parents of students with disabilities?
7. Do you attend IEP meetings and feel confident participating in them?
  - a. Do you feel confident in your knowledge of special education laws, services, and programs?
8. What is your educational background?
  - a. How has that training helped you in your principalship?
  - b. What training would have helped?
9. What is your professional background?
  - a. How has that training helped you in your principalship?
  - b. What training would have helped?
10. Do you think that your teachers perceive you as an effective leader for students with disabilities?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Questions for Teachers**

1. What characteristics do you think make a principal effective in administering to special education students?
2. Do you feel like you are able to provide high quality instruction for all students?
  - a. Do you think that your principal supports you in providing high quality instruction?
3. What kinds of services and programs does your principal encourage?
4. Do you think that your principal is good at communicating with the parents of special education students?
5. Do you think that your principal understands your job duties, teaching methods, and/or services?

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